

**Testimony of  
Dr. Larry E. Reider  
Kern County Superintendent of Schools  
on  
ETV05 Regionalize K-12 Educational Infrastructure**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am Dr. Larry Reider, Kern County Superintendent of Schools.

I am pleased that the Commission acknowledges and validates the need for an intermediate level of K-12 governance between California's thousand local school districts and State government in Sacramento. For 150 years, California has had an intermediate level that lies between the broad policymaking of the state and implementation by and accountability of local districts; providing educational services to California's most at-risk students, support services and, when necessary, fiscal oversight to local school districts.

**The Importance of the Intermediate Level of K-12 Governance**

The intermediate level has always been the county superintendent of schools. The position of county superintendent was first included in the Constitution of 1849 and it was reestablished as an elected constitutional office in 1879. In 1976, the voters in each county where superintendents are elected chose to continue the elective nature of the position.

Preserving and strengthening this Intermediate level is critical to the success of any governance model for California's future. County offices are the primary provider of direct educational services to expelled and court adjudicated students, our most severely emotionally disturbed and orthopedically handicapped students, as well as most low incidence disabilities such as blind and deaf students. In most counties, including Kern, county offices provide the majority of preschool and center-based child care and development programs to children ages 0-5. At the county office level, districts receive immediate, real-time fiscal oversight, administrative guidance and support with curriculum implementation and staff development. At the county level, districts are able to express local needs and concerns to people who are familiar with their communities and circumstances. County offices are the nucleus of regional efforts designed to save time and money (such as the joint purchase or provision of goods and services). They allow for flexible responses based on local needs while insuring that statewide policy initiatives are implemented correctly and effectively.

In recent years, the state, in an effort to increase safety on regular school campuses, has required county offices to insure that there is an educational placement for every student who has been expelled from local schools. Additionally, the state has strengthened the role of county offices in fiscal oversight, first with the adoption of AB 1200 in 1991 which gave county superintendents the ability to disapprove local budgets and require audits of local district financial and management practices. The county office role has been further emphasized and enhanced by this year's enactment of AB 2756. Most recently, the settlement of the Williams lawsuit calls upon county superintendents to intensify their efforts to visit the schools within their counties and to focus on the provision of adequate facilities and the proper assignment of qualified teachers.

Using county offices in this way makes state government more relevant and responsive and local districts more accountable. County offices (including elected county superintendents) and their relationships with local districts are already well established.

The alternative of regional operations will fail to meet the needs of our communities. In California, a number of counties are larger than individual states. Reliance on models from other states ignores our unique history and geography.

While the Commission's report has recommended the elimination of county superintendents and boards of education (commonly referred to as county offices of education), it calls for establishment of "a new framework [to] focus resources more effectively and efficiently; strengthen the role and function of this intermediate arm of governance; and better serve students and local districts." We agree that California should focus resources, strengthen intermediate K-12 governance and enhance services. *The best way to accomplish these goals is to strengthen county offices, not eliminate them entirely or replace them with regional agencies.*

#### **What County Superintendents of Schools Do**

As the attached chart [this is the matrix of 58 county office educational services] clearly demonstrates, the services provided by the 58 county offices are a comprehensive and fundamental part of K-12 education. Although there is some variation in local approaches, the core mission performed by county superintendents is common throughout California.

In Kern County, the County Superintendent of Schools Office is the only school district for more than 10,000 of our county's 160,000 students, serving all the educational needs of more than six percent of our K-12 enrollment. These include juvenile court and community school students, those attending two county office operated charter schools and those in our most intensive special

education classes. In addition, we provide supplemental special education services to 800 students enrolled in local districts and operate pre-kindergarten child development for more than 2100 children. We also provide services to more than 26,000 students enrolled in migrant education.

In Kern County, we have been a leader in the expansion of the role of the county superintendent in fiscal oversight for local districts. With the enactment of AB 1200 in 1991, the Legislature created the County Office Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT). A number of county offices applied to be the administrative agent for FCMAT. Based on Kern County's application and our history of aggressive and proactive intervention in the fiscal affairs of local districts, we were selected for that purpose and have been proud to provide administrative direction to FCMAT for the past 13 years. FCMAT also operates the California Student Information Systems project (CSIS) that is the State's unified effort to provide an online mechanism for the exchange of student information among all 1000 California districts.

In addition to fiscal oversight, we provide payroll and retirement services for all Kern County districts. We also offer new school construction and renovation assistance to districts that do not have expertise in these areas.

We are a leader in the development of regional services extending well beyond the boundaries of Kern County. Our self-insurance health benefit programs (Self Insured Schools of California or "SISC") serve 284 districts in 32 counties, representing 170,000 employees. SISC also provides self-insurance for workers compensation and property and liability insurance for all districts in our county. In addition, we operate the legal services program for districts in five counties.

Within Kern County, we provide vehicle maintenance for school districts and other public agencies. We offer technology support services to 34 of our 47 districts. Our instructional materials lab is open to teachers in all schools, public and private. We offer staff assessment and direct assistance to underperforming schools and direct curriculum support to all of our districts.

When districts need interim superintendent services, we are the primary supplier. We also assist districts in the recruitment of teachers and administrators.

The Kern County Network for Children promotes efficiency and collaboration among private, public and nonprofit agencies that provide assistance to children and counties. By general agreement, this agency is administered by the county superintendent's office.

### **Why the County Model Works**

The direct instructional services provided by county offices of education

provide a critical safety net and insure that even the most vulnerable and at-risk students in every California county have access to an educational program provided by a local education agency. Eliminating the county office will not change the imperative to serve these students directly and be responsive to them locally.

Operating alternative education programs in connection with juvenile justice authorities is a county government function. County offices are recognized and respected by local officials as a county-level service unit. Elected county superintendents respond to the same constituency as the board of supervisors, the district attorney, the sheriff and the judges.

In cooperation with local districts, county offices function as regional agencies for the provision of administrative support and intensive instruction to children with unique needs (particularly low incidence programs like hearing and vision impaired) and supplemental services that many small and intermediate sized districts cannot efficiently and cost-effectively provide on their own. Throughout the state, county superintendents are integral partners with districts in Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA's) for these purposes.

#### **Why the Regional Model Does Not Work**

As an alternative to complete elimination of the intermediate governance level, the Commission suggests regionalization along lines that the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) has developed solely for organizational purposes. The justification for this proposal is that regional models have been employed in other states. What the Commission does not adequately acknowledge is that these alternative models have developed in other states for reasons that do not fit the California experience.

Many of California's counties are larger than some individual states. These include not only rapidly developing counties like San Bernardino (larger in area than Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Delaware combined), but much more sparsely populated areas like Humboldt, Inyo, Lassen, Modoc and Siskiyou. In Kern County, which is larger than Massachusetts, the county seat of Bakersfield is already 100 miles or more from some districts. Shifting the source of administrative and instructional support to other counties within the CCSESA region that includes Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and Ventura Counties (or to Bakersfield to serve those counties) will contribute to the isolation of students, parents and administrators.

Nor will regionalization substitute for the personal relationship that an elected county superintendent maintains with the superior courts, the district attorney and sheriff and the probation department. Counties and courts are not going to regionalize, and the Commission has not recommended that they do so. The county superintendent is an officer of county government and is recognized and



dealt with as such by the board of supervisors and other officers and employees at the county level.

The Commission acknowledges the increased reliance the Legislature has placed on county superintendents to provide fiscal oversight. Fiscal accountability requires reliable income projections, sound budgeting, disciplined expenditure control, and careful review of spending for legal compliance. It is not prudent management of public funds to leave these matters solely to the discretion of school districts without monitoring by an independent and external agency. Experience and geography tell us that these functions cannot be performed only from Sacramento. Nor, in a state with counties larger than many individual states, can the performance of these functions be enhanced by increasing the distance between the monitors and the local districts they oversee.

### **How the Intermediate Unit Can Be Strengthened**

The Legislature has already taken important steps to enhance the role of county superintendents in fiscal oversight of local districts. AB 2756 is the latest example and it would be a responsible recommendation to build on this model. The Williams lawsuit settlement also looks to county superintendents to insure that the reforms that have been agreed to are carried out. As districts assume greater responsibility to insure that students have access to adequate facilities, current textbooks and qualified teachers, the Commission should consider the importance of their historical and ongoing relationships with the local county office of education. Regionalizing this effort only makes the hands-on and cooperative work that will be required more difficult to accomplish.

As districts are required to be more accountable fiscally, it makes sense for them to receive increased training and assistance from the very agencies that will be working with them on budget development and expenditure control. No one can argue with the proposition that county offices will need more help in developing the expertise necessary to carry on the new tasks that will be required, or that greater coordination should be achieved between the financial accounting systems at the county and district levels. The Commission is well advised to recommend that resources be allocated for this added level of responsibility at both county and district levels.

Throughout California, regionalization of services is taking place without mandates from the State level. More can be done in this area. The Commission should encourage these efforts when they stem from local needs, rather than one-size-fits-all requirements. County offices are already accomplishing this goal, but not within arbitrary boundaries imposed from Sacramento.